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## The Role of Well-Being

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## THE ROLE OF WELL-BEING

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'Well-being' signifies the good life, the life which is good for the person whose life it is. Much of the discussion of well-being, including a fair proportion of my own<sup>2</sup>, aims to explain what kind of life is good for the people whose life it is, what constitutes well-being. I have argued that well-being consists in a whole-hearted and successful pursuit of valuable relationships and goals. This view, a little modified, is part of the background to the discussion to follow. However, my purpose here is to consider the role of well-being in practical thought. In particular I will examine a suggestion, which I will call the radical suggestion, which says that *when we care about people, and when we ought to care about people, what we do, or ought to, care about is their well-being*. The suggestion is indifferent to who cares and who is cared for. People may care, perhaps ought to care, about themselves, and they may care, perhaps ought to care, about people with whom they have, or ought to have special bonds, and finally they may care, perhaps ought to care, about other people generally (I will refer to this as caring about strangers). In all cases what they care, or ought to care, about is the well-being of the relevant people, themselves or others.

The radical suggestion is not as radical as some. It allows that the reasons or duties of care, and their stringency, may vary depending on the relationship between the carers and the cared for. Besides, it does not include the claim that moral reasons or duties, or self-regarding reasons, or reasons or duties of friendship, or of other relationships, are reasons, duties of well-being, and nothing else. The view that this is so will be neither assumed nor examined here.

My impression is that discussions of the concept acquired their current prominence over the last 30–40 years, in the hope that it would help with pressing philosophical problems, primarily ones encountered by people sympathetic to the ethos of utilitarianism. First, it became clear to many that the claim that what matters to people in their life is either pleasure and the avoidance of pain, or preference-satisfaction, is unsustainable. Other things matter too. Second, Rawls gave expression to a vague concern that utilitarianism while intending to be concerned with people manages to miss out on the importance of people. In its classical versions, for example, it virtually regards

people as repositories of pleasure. We should (according to some versions) maximize the total or the average (per person) amount of pleasure, never mind where it resides. It is pleasure which matters, not people.

The concept emerged or re-emerged in recent times with the claim that it is helpful in both an explanatory (designating what people care about when they care about themselves or others) and a normative role (what they should care about when they care about themselves or others). The phrase 'well-being' is used in philosophical writing in a meaning different from its meaning in English<sup>3</sup>. Hence an examination of the concept cannot be entirely separated from examination of its intended role. It emerged in philosophical discussions to play this role. We cannot understand it otherwise. It is meant to play this role through having two basic features. First, it is a property of a life. Second, it is a property a life possesses in virtue of its character, taken as a whole. Of course, we can apply it also to periods in a life. However, the concept plays its pivotal theoretical role, as expressed in the radical suggestion, when applied to life taken as a whole.

In Part One I will defend the concept against some criticisms of its coherence or significance. In Part Two I will reject the radical suggestion and propose an alternative understanding of the role of well-being. My purpose is primarily to sketch a position, whose defence requires more extensive and far-ranging arguments than can be offered here. All I can hope to do is to indicate the direction of some of them.

## **Part One: The Concept**

### *1. The objective value component*

The radical suggestion is that caring for people is (a) caring about the quality of their life, (b) in its entirety, and (c) that that means caring that they should have a life which is good for them. A person enjoys a high degree of well-being if his life is good in a way which is good for him, as against just good (perhaps morally good) or good in ways which are good for his dependents, or for his country, or for his employer, etc., but not for him.

One possible objection to the radical suggestion says that we should distinguish between a happy life and a good life. A good life is one of rectitude, propriety, moral good deeds, of integrity and adherence to standards of personal morality, or devotion to one's family or to one's friends, or of contribution to the arts, sciences, or other admirable branches of culture, or whatever—always provided that it did not include lapses which negate the significance of the good activities or events. A happy life is one of contentment, of ambitions and aspirations realized, etc, always provided that it did not include frustrations and sufferings which negate those satisfactions. The concept of well-being is a hybrid, an attempt to find a concept which is half one and half the other. A good life may be a happy one, but such coincidence is contingent, and should not

encourage the emergence of, or assigning any theoretical role to, the hybrid concept of a life which is good (borrowed from a good life) for the person whose life it is (borrowed from happiness).

There is a thorough subjectivist understanding of the objection, according to which one necessary condition of the happy life is that it is one the person whose life it is is happy with. Happiness on this view is transparent to those who are happy. We need not accept that view. We may believe that people may be unreflective about their own life, be neither happy nor unhappy with their life, and yet be happy or unhappy. We may also believe that sometimes people think they are unhappy or that they are happy when they are not. We may understand people correcting their view of past periods of their life, saying 'I then thought that I was so happy. Now I realize that it was merely an illusion, or that I was deceiving myself'. The point remains that the objective element in happiness, the element which makes it possible for people to be mistaken or self-deceived about their happiness, is not a value element. The happy life remains, even on this more objective understanding of happiness, distinct from the good life, and requires no goodness at all.

The problem with this view is that a happy life cannot be devoid of valuable activities. First, a happy life, as well as one that is good for the agent whose life it is, is marked not only by satisfaction with occasional specific events or activities. It is marked by a general attitude to oneself, and specifically by whole-hearted acceptance by the person of himself, of who he is. Second, both the general attitude to oneself, and the specific satisfaction with events and activities, depend on the agent's belief that these actions and events are worthwhile. One cannot be completely and unreservedly satisfied with an activity or an event which one believes to be meaningless, demeaning, worthless, etc. One cannot whole-heartedly accept being what one is if one believes oneself to be evil, depraved, lacking in integrity, etc.

Several questions arise. First, can one accept unreservedly and contentedly what one takes to be worthless or base? Second, if not, is this an empirical generalization or a necessary truth? Third, assuming that the answer is that there is a necessary connection between whole-hearted (undiluted, unambivalent) acceptance and belief in that attitude or its object being well-deserved<sup>4</sup>, the question remains whether one needs to have any view of the value of what gives one pleasure. Do I need to believe that a song is a good song to enjoy it? Or that an ice cream is a good one in order to take pleasure in it? These questions cannot be explored here. But as the last one is crucial to my argument let me say something about it. Logical and conceptual truths which can be known *a priori* (e.g., that if *P* and *If P then Q* then *Q*, or that *Yellow is a color*) are rightly attributed to people who may never have consciously entertained them provided that (a) these truths can be expressed in concepts which are understood by these people, and (b) the people use these concepts in ways which conform to the truths we attribute to them. The second of these conditions is part of the grounds for attributing possession of the concepts.

Possession of a concept requires some, though not complete, understanding of it, a degree, though not the highest degree, of knowledge of the rules which govern its correct use. We can attribute a belief in a conceptual truth to people who mastered the concept, however imperfectly, provided the imperfections in their understanding do not consist in contradicting the belief attributed.

So, if there is a necessary connection between accepting or taking pleasure in something and beliefs about one's attitude or its object having an appropriate value, then it would be right to attribute knowledge of that fact to people who have the concepts and use them without contradicting it. Is there such a necessary connection? It is based on the Socratic-Aristotelian view that actions, desires and other aspirations are rational only to the extent that they are believed to be worthwhile, which often means that they have worthwhile objects. None of this can be established here.<sup>5</sup> Two comments about its basis are, however, helpful in clarifying the view: First, desires, aspirations and actions are open to criticism. Criticism which if justified would require abandoning them. That is a conceptual truth. But then does it not follow that in acting, intending or desiring one assumes that the criticism does not apply, i.e. that they are worthwhile? Second, the very attribution of intentions, intentional actions, desires, etc. depends on criteria such as that the fact that one does not take an action when one could take it at no cost or sacrifice, would indicate, other things being equal, that one did not intend to take it, and that one did not want to take it. But the criteria cannot be one-dimensional: we can criticize people for being irrational in not doing what they intended when they could, etc. The criteria are multifaceted, so that attribution is warranted even when agents fail in some criteria, a failure which will often show that they are irrational. For criticism of this kind to be possible, and for the multifaceted criteria to relate to rationality, desires, intentions, etc. must relate to rational factors, namely beliefs in their worthwhileness.

This is as much as I can do here to defend the view that normally people can be happy only if they believe that their life, activities, etc. were worthwhile. It does not show that happiness requires that they actually were worthwhile. This may indeed not be so. The question we face is whether happiness which is based on a mistake about the quality of the life concerned is an ideal to any degree at all? This does not seem plausible. It is not relevant that under some circumstances it is good to have an experience based on false belief: to experiment, to learn how to tell it from its twin true belief, to save one's life, or that of others and so on. What we are asking is whether it can be intrinsically, not instrumentally, valuable, and whether it can be valuable as the rule, rather than as an exception. That is improbable. Not because there is value in having true beliefs or true experiences. Rather that whatever value is in an experience depends on its character. The false experiences, i.e. the experiences based on false beliefs, which one is supposed to assume make for happiness, are not the experiences the people who have them think they have, nor the ones they want to have. They want to experience being loved and admired and they experience being flattered

and used. What is there about the experiences which they have which makes them good and valuable? Possibly, nothing; possibly they are not valuable at all. But if they are, this will depend on some understanding of the value of experiences which makes it independent of what the people who have them think they have or want to have.

The emerging conclusion is that the criticism of 'well-being' as a hybrid concept cannot be sustained. The notion of 'happiness' even when understood as involving nothing more than a state of the person whose happiness is in question involves reference to values, if only in the form of believed valuables. If happiness matters, if we should care about our or other people's happiness then it must consist in the satisfaction of worth-while desires, or, more generally, whatever mental states happiness consists in must have value, usually through their objects being worthwhile.

## 2. Good for

Another, almost exactly opposite, objection denies that there is a coherent concept able to play the role that the concept of well-being is supposed to play, because the reference to 'a life good for the person whose life it is' makes no sense. To be sure a life could be good or bad to various degrees. But that, the objection goes, is so in virtue of the life including good or bad, valuable or worthless episodes or actions. Saying that they are good for the person in whose life they occur adds nothing, and misleads us into believing that there is something added. There is no sense in which episodes in a life, or the life as a whole, can be good for the person whose life it is beyond just being good.

If this objection is right we are back with the sort of value theory exemplified by versions of utilitarianism, which fails to find value in human beings as such. They are locations of valuable episodes. What matters, what we should strive to pursue or promote are valuable events or episodes such as pleasure, or discriminating or refined aesthetic appreciation, physical accomplishment, or making scientific discoveries.<sup>6</sup> The people who manifest them have no distinctive claim on our attention, or, indeed, on their own attention.

The same is true if value inheres not only in episodes in the life of people, but also in a person's life itself. Even then the value is not the personal value of the people themselves: their existence is simply impersonally good. It is so, for example, if the existence (=life) of people or of anything which is not a copy of another thing, but distinctive, is important because it adds variety to the world. But are intrinsic values, or some of them, personal in the required way? Is 'non-instrumentally'<sup>7</sup> good for X' different from 'is good and resides (or can, will, etc. reside) in X'?

An initial, partial, answer is readily available. There is a difference between different ways in which a person may be involved in a valuable event or state. Contrast the following two pairs of examples:

- (1.1) Mary is photographed without her knowledge, and the photograph is used to become a vital element in a great work of art.
- (2.1) Rather drunk, Mary falls asleep with her body blocking shut the (fire) door, thus saving many people from the fire which erupted accidentally on the other side.
- (1.2) Mary takes a photographic self-portrait and incorporates it in a great work of art she was creating at the time.
- (2.2) Aware of the danger the fire poses, Mary stays by the fire door pressing it shut, thus saving many lives.

In all examples a good or valuable episode involving Mary occurs. The material difference is that the first list is of things which happen to Mary. She is active in the episodes of the second list, while passive in those of the first. That difference explains why neither episode in the first list can be good for her<sup>8</sup>, whereas those in the second list can be.<sup>9</sup> Episodes in which we are passive, as well as ones in which we do not feature at all, can be good for us only indirectly, through their contribution to another valuable aspect of our activities. Only active episodes can be directly good for us.<sup>10</sup>

What explains the connection between activity and being (directly) good for a person? The answer requires sketching, in the briefest and crudest of outlines, a couple of fundamental distinctions in the basic modes<sup>11</sup> in which things, events or states can be good or have value. The first distinction is fairly familiar, and is best illustrated by the way one thinks of the value of natural features, like the Grand Canyon. Some people think that the value (aesthetic or other) of the Grand Canyon is totally independent of its appreciation or the possibility of its appreciation by anyone. Others think of its value as fulfilled only if it is appreciated by valuers, and wasted or pointless otherwise. Some values, e.g. friendship, cannot be instantiated without being appreciated. One cannot have a friendship without the friends being aware of the fact, and valuing it.<sup>12</sup> For our purposes, however, they can be treated together with, e.g., good novels which must be written, but need not be read, and either way their value may remain unappreciated. What is common to friendships and novels, and much else which is of intrinsic value, is that they are fully realized only when appreciated and engaged in in the right spirit, in the right way (in this case: read with understanding). To facilitate expression I will call such values 'personal values'. On some views the value of the Grand Canyon is personal, on others it is impersonal. Similarly, on some views the value of valuers, e.g. of persons, is impersonal. But arguably their value is purely personal<sup>13</sup>, that is it is not fully realized unless they bond with others who, one way or another, appreciate their value.

For present purposes I will proceed on the assumption that all values are personal. I will take it to entail that anything which is of value *can* be good for someone. Some take anything which has (personal) value to be good because it is good for someone. According to them, 'good' is short for 'good for someone'. I believe that this is neither true nor an implication of values being personal.

If something is intrinsically good for me it is so because it is good—‘it would be good for you to read this novel. It is really excellent’—and it is that very quality which makes it good for others too. It would be good for you to read the book for the same reason it is good for me, i.e. because it is an excellent book. Of course, not everything good is good for me. I need to be able to appreciate it and engage in it. (I may be tone deaf. Music is not for me.) It has to fit in my life (I may be set on becoming a weight-lifter, which is inconsistent with being a good long distance runner), and there may be other conditions. But whatever is good (unconditionally and non-instrumentally) for one person can be good for others, and will be good for them for the same reason—because it is good. This primacy of ‘good’ over ‘good for’ is consistent with values being personal, for it is consistent with it being a condition on anything being good that it is capable of being good for some valuer. It cannot be good if its value cannot be appreciated and engaged in by some valuer.

There are three kinds of personal values. Things having personal value can be intrinsically good in the way in which good paintings, good novels, or beautiful landscapes are. Or they can be good in themselves (according to one use of this phrase) in the way in which persons are, i.e. beings who can appreciate value and respond to it, be guided in their actions by it. They can also be intrinsically good in the way in which my listening to the Emersons playing the Second Razumovsky Quartet can be good. This last category is of valuers responding to value (intrinsic or instrumental) in appropriate ways. The value of things provides us with reasons for appropriate responses, in action, emotion, or thought. As mentioned, metaphorically speaking what is of intrinsic value is wasted if not responded to in the appropriate way. Correspondingly, valuers are diminished if when it would be appropriate to do so they are unable to respond to what is of value.

I do not know in what way the instantiation of an impersonal value can be good for anyone. Personal values, on the other hand, are there to be appreciated and engaged in. The ability to be good for people or other valuers is central to their nature as personal values. In general, any appropriate response to value out of appreciation of its value, is good for one. The common exception is when it conflicts with stronger reasons one has. Broadly speaking two kinds of responses are appropriate. I will refer to them as engaging with the value and respecting it. Appreciating or enjoying a good painting, a good drink, participating in an appropriate way in a good party, dance, or discussion are examples of engagement with value. Protecting or restoring a good painting, protecting the party from hooligans or other interferences, are examples of respecting value.

Beyond the fact that engaging with something of value involves appreciation of its value in some way (e.g. taking pleasure in it) and to some degree, not much can be said in the abstract about what constitutes engagement with a value. It depends on the value concerned. The actions required by reasons of respect for value too are diverse, but united in being aimed at protecting that which has the value. In one sense of the term we respect something if our actions

and attitudes conform to reasons of respect, whatever the reasons for which we act. In another, stronger sense, we respect something only if we do what respect requires out of respect. Of the two engaging with value is primary. Respect is due in recognition of the fact that the value is there to be engaged with. Its point is to keep open the opportunity to engage with what is of value.

Because episodes which are good for us directly (i.e. among other things, non-instrumentally) consist in an appropriate response to value, they are episodes in which we are active. Needless to say, while only what is good for me can directly contribute to my well-being, not everything which is good for me does so. As will be explained in the next section, it may be good for me to watch some TV program tonight, even though it will have no bearing on my well-being.

Establishing the distinctiveness of the concept of a life good for the person whose life it is does not yet meet the objection. Admitting that whatever is good for one is good, it remains a puzzle why my well-being should carry any normative weight, or have any normative force beyond the value of the actions and events in my life. What is good about well-being as such? Why should caring about people consist in caring about their well-being? This seems to require that their well-being has value which is distinct from the value of episodes in their life. If, for example, I am a great educator, or sportsman, then many of my actions are valuable independently of whether I hate myself for engaging in them, or have other of the negative attitudes which affect well-being. Does it mean that my actions or my life have less value than those of someone whose life differs from mine just in that he accepts who he is and what he does? If not does it not follow that well-being is not valuable in itself, and that we have no reason to pursue it for its own sake?

That way of putting the objection may make it sound like an objection to the thought that there is any reason to care about people, rather than about valuable episodes, which may or may not be good for them, or for the impersonal value of their life. It becomes an objection to the radical suggestion, and to the role of the concept of well-being, only if there is a way of caring about people which does not involve caring about their well-being.

### 3. *'Life as a whole'*

Suppose we accept that caring about people is caring about their life, on the ground that people have nothing beyond their life. Suppose we further accept that caring about people's lives is caring about the quality of their life, about how good their life is. Even if that is so does it follow that what we then care about is the well-being of the people we care about? One doubt is raised by the fact that the judgements of well-being we are interested in are about how good people's lives are as a whole. There are various ways of understanding this condition. *The atomistic view* maintains that the contribution of every moment or episode to one's well-being is independent of the content of the rest of one's life.

*The objective balance view* maintains that the contribution of moments in a life to one's well-being is not independent of that of other moments in one's life. It takes the well-being of people to depend in part on the relations between different parts of their life. Possibly for every person, given his talents and tastes, there is a range of experiences such that his life is good for him to the extent that it displays the right balance between them. Having too much of one kind or too little of another makes life worse. Hence if in the past I read lots of philosophy, but never played football, my well-being will get worse if I continue as before, and will improve if I abandon philosophy for football.

Objective balance accounts can be total or partial, depending on whether they hold that every moment of one's life contributes to or detracts from the ideal balance. I know of people who adopted plans of life informed by a desire to have a life which is balanced in certain ways, and whose plans do not appear unreasonable. At the same time I know of no good argument that the absence of some such balance detracts from the well-being of the people whose life it is. So far as I can see, the life of a person whose life is governed by an all-consuming dedication to mathematics, or some other single pursuit, need not be less good for him than the life of those who have a much better balanced life. In ways which need explaining, well-being does not necessarily depend on balanced patterns, though it may be served by them in the life of people who pursue such goals. I will therefore ignore the balance view from now on. Instead I will contrast the atomistic view with another, which seems to me correct:

*The variable pattern view* denies that all moments in one's life count equally, or even count at all. One's well-being, according to this view, depends in the main on the degree to which one succeeds in pursuing valuable relationships and projects which one adopted as one's own. Subject to an important qualification to follow, episodes in one's life which do not bear on them do not affect one's well-being, and those which do bear on them vary in importance according to their contribution to those relationships and goals, and to the importance of these relationships and goals to one's life.

The atomistic view consists of two claims:

*The independence claim:* The contribution of moments in one's life to one's well-being depends on their intrinsic value only, and is independent of their relations to other aspects of one's life.

*The positive correlation claim:* The better the quality of any moment the greater its contribution to the well-being of the person whose life it is.

Both are mistaken. There are various possible reasons for rejecting them. Possibly different stages in people's life contribute differently to their well-being. A traditional view distinguishes between a preparatory stage in childhood and early youth, a stage of mature activity, and a stage of relative retirement. Possibly people's years of mature activity count more (minute for minute, as it were) towards their well-being than the early or later stages. We discount a

relatively unhappy childhood, or undistinguished decline late in life, if they flank years of successful mature activity.

The claim that all events in childhood, or some other period, must be completely discounted is not credible. Imagine a severe illness which causes great suffering and disables one from pursuing any rewarding activity, other than fighting that illness. There can be no reason to deny that the period of that illness, whenever in life it occurs, matters a lot to the well-being of that person. But one can reject atomism, and maintain that some episodes, periods, or aspects of people's lives do not matter to their well-being, even though they would have mattered had they followed a different course. The variable pattern view, for example, could accommodate this possibility by taking well-being to be, in part, a function of the degree to which the life of the people concerned successfully realizes a pattern, which in turn determines the relative value of different periods or aspects of their life, while in part being pattern-independent. Certain modes of conduct or pursuit are—on this view—appropriate for people of a certain age, but not for others, or appropriate for people in certain occupations but not for others, appropriate towards people with whom we have certain relations, but not towards others, and so on. Their contribution to well-being depends on their appropriateness. Other states, events or their aspects affect well-being in a pattern-independent way. Arguably they include one's basic attitudes to oneself (e.g., unjustified low self-esteem, unjustified lack of self-respect, self-hate, shame about one's looks), occurrence of severe and enduring pain and suffering, and commission of serious wrong-doing. The pattern-dependent elements relate to projects and relationships regarding which people that have them are active<sup>14</sup>, whereas pattern independent factors may include events in which the people concerned are passive. Arguably, some, perhaps even many actions, states or events in a life do not manifest any pattern-independent features. Similarly, many of them do not manifest pattern-dependent ones. If so then numerous decisions, actions or other aspects of one's life have no bearing on one's well-being, and others have variable impact. That is, their impact is not due to their intrinsic character, but depends on how they are situated in one's life relative to certain patterns.

If well-being is pattern-dependent, and the determination of the relevant pattern is contingent then the relevance, if any, of different episodes, or aspects of episodes, to people's well-being cannot be determined independently of their relations to other episodes. The significance of each episode, if any, depends, contrary to the independence claim, on its relations to others, in light of the direction the person whose life it is gave to his or her life. The relevance and meaning of other episodes is determined by reference to that pattern.

What reasons are there to endorse the variable pattern view? I will use examples to illustrate its plausibility.<sup>15</sup> Here is one:

In order to participate effectively in a public debate I read about the other participants, and spend a good deal of time considering the questions under

discussion. I make sure that I am well rested and untroubled when arriving at the venue of the debate, and that I introduce myself to the other speakers trying to establish a suitably civilized atmosphere even before the event starts. I then perform my role in the debate.

Any action in the pattern derives its meaning from its role in preparing me for the debate, and its value depends on its success in that, coming from its contribution to my performance once the debate takes place, and from its relations to other preparatory events, which may make it more or less redundant or more or less effective, and therefore more or less valuable. Moments of anxiety can be more valuable than moments of pleasure, if, for example, they make me more alert, whereas the pleasure of the pleasurable moments induces an unhelpful over-confidence.

The pattern displayed in this example is instrumental. No less common are non-instrumental patterns. Valuable activities extend over time (though they need not be continuous, nor all absorbing—we may be able to do other things even while engaged with one of them). Think of attending a film, or climbing a rock-face, or just about any other culture-imbued activity some people care about. All of them extend over time, and in all of them the value of the episode as a whole depends on appropriate relations between different moments in time. In all of them, moreover, the value of moments in time depends not only, not so much, on their intrinsic qualities as on their relations to other parts of the episode. Fear and frustration can be more valuable than enjoyment in the context of a patterned valuable activity. They may be the appropriate response to an event in a play, or a novel, or to the experiences of a friend, etc.

The patterns illustrated so far are rather limited in scope and duration. But they tend to be elements of wider, more extensive patterns which determine the meaning of our lives in our own eyes. One person is an ardent lover, a software developer, and a jazz enthusiast, who plays the stock exchange, and spends his holidays surfing. Another is a concerned parent, a social worker, a devoted and loyal friend, etc. Such brief profiles are to a degree part of people's myth-making about themselves or about others. But when true they determine the meaning of people's lives, and the parameters by which their well-being is to be judged.<sup>16</sup>

My suggestion was that the pattern-dependent aspect of well-being consists in success in the whole-hearted pursuit of valuable relationships and goals. There are many relationships which could be, when appropriately pursued, valuable, and many valuable goals and projects to pursue. Sometimes the circumstances of our life dictate that some we must and others we must not pursue, but generally there is a wide area of choice, that is choice among relationships and goals which are worthwhile, and therefore would be good to pursue, but need not be pursued. Others may be adopted instead. Their pursuit determines the contours of people's well-being, they set the standards by which people's well-being is determined. People enjoy a good life to the extent that they succeed in the wholehearted pursuit of their adopted relationships and goals.

That they are indifferent or bad in other types of activities and pursuits does not adversely affect their well-being, nor does the occasional success in something which could have been, but is not part of their goals and pursuits add to their well-being.

The variable pattern view encounters two important problems: First, it has to identify which pursuits and relationships are important enough to bear on one's well-being. Second, well-being is supposed to be a property a life has in virtue of its character as a whole, but as according to the variable pattern view not everything which happens in people's lives affects people's well-being, how can it justify regarding well-being as a property a life has in virtue of its character as a whole?

We need to solve the first problem in a way which will solve the second as well. Broadly speaking the aspects of a life which are relevant to its well-being are those which *could* contribute to people's sense of the meaningfulness of their life, given their interests and tastes.<sup>17</sup>

The sense of meaningfulness is best known to us through its opposite, the sense that one's life is meaningless, pointless. Many people do not reflect about the meaning of their life, nor have any view on the subject. That is enough to say that they find their life meaningful. Saying that need not amount to more than the absence of a feeling that one's life is pointless or meaningless. Much can be said about both attitudes, but for present purposes I will take them to be sufficiently understood, and will only add a few brief clarifications:

*First*, whatever else is indicated by finding life pointless, or meaningless, it indicates an estrangement, and more particularly, an enervated and depressed mode of being. Those who find point and meaning in their life are fully invested in their life, they address themselves to various relationships and projects with energy and commitment, and these attitudes infect other aspects of their life as well. Those who feel that their life is meaningless merely go through the motions without spirit. Their heart is not in it.

*Second*, when asked to explain, both those who do and those who do not find meaning in their life will point to the presence, or absence, of certain relationships and pursuits. They find their life meaningful because of them, or would find it meaningful had it included something like them.<sup>18</sup>

*Third*, whether people's life has point and meaning depends in part on whether they find meaning in it. Perhaps this is a necessary condition of its being meaningful. However, that people find their life meaningful is not sufficient to make it meaningful. Certain aspects of life can give it meaning and others cannot. The philosophically famous blade-of-grass-counter may think that counting blades of grass makes his life meaningful, but it does not.

*Fourth*, and finally, not every aspect of our life which can contribute to its meaningfulness does so: aspects of our life which can contribute to its meaningfulness do so only if we take them to do so, not necessarily by reflecting on the question, but in investing ourselves in them, and holding them to be central to our life, to what, as we sometimes say, our life is about.

With these points behind us we can solve the two problems: First, the aspects of our life which contribute to our well-being, in the sense that success in them enhances it and failure detracts from it, are those which could make us feel that our life is not meaningless, whether or not they do so, and all activities and experiences which relate to them contribute to our well-being. Others do not. The fact that those aspects of our life can make it meaningful or meaningless justifies regarding their impact on the life as determining its success as a whole. This claim does not presuppose some priority to 'life not being meaningless' over 'well-being'. These concepts are interdependent. We understand them, and explain them, by pointing to their modes of interdependence.

## **Part Two: The Normative Role of Well-Being**

### *4. The first person case*

One view has it that people always inevitably strive to pursue their own well-being, and nothing else. Some used to take this to be a robust empirical generalization, others as some kind of necessary truth. The preceding account of well-being shows this view to be not merely false but necessarily false. Our well-being is constituted by success and failure in our worthwhile relationships and pursuits. And we must have pursued them for reasons other than to enhance our well-being, because that reason would have been served by many other relationships and pursuits and it beggars belief that we never have any reasons to discriminate between the course we pursued and all its worthwhile alternatives, that we never have more specific reasons bearing on the relative attractions of those different options. Hence, even if the thought that a friendship or a pursuit would, if successful, enhance our well-being may be in our mind, most commonly it affects us only in as much as we are moved by some other reason to adopt the course of action in question, aware that if we succeed, it will enhance our life. Besides, many intrinsically valuable relationships and pursuits have to be undertaken for appropriate reasons (fondness of the friend, love of music, etc.), and are beyond the reach of anyone acting for his own well-being alone.

It may appear that while well-being can be achieved only if not aimed at, it is the inevitable result of all successful actions. The necessary connection between successful action and contribution to well-being does not exist. The two come apart in a number of cases. First, there are cases where we act intentionally but for inadequate reasons. This can be the case when the action is irrational, for example when it manifests weakness of the will. It can also be the case when we mistakenly think that we have adequate reasons. Many immoral actions are of this kind: those who commit them believe that they have adequate reasons for their actions, but they are wrong. Since well-being is only served by pursuit of worthwhile goals such cases cannot serve one's well-being. Second, and more interestingly, there are numerous cases in which we act for adequate reasons, and yet even if successful our actions do not

enhance our well-being.<sup>19</sup> This happens when the action or experience has no bearing on our well-being, but also, more dramatically, when it militates against our well-being. I have discussed the first of these above. There are numerous actions and experiences of this kind, i.e. ones involving no significant immorality, nor any of the other pattern-independent factors capable of affecting our well-being, and which are not connected to any of our significant relationships and pursuits. Perhaps less numerous but in various ways more important are choices which we make for adequate reasons, and which jeopardize<sup>20</sup> or directly diminish our well-being. The most often noted examples of this kind are choices which sacrifice our well-being for some moral cause.

Well-being is neither the intended nor the unintended end of all our intentional actions. But is it, for the person whose life is in question, a normative consideration at all? Is it ever an independent reason for an action that that action will contribute to the agent's well-being? It is easy to give both an affirmative and a negative reply. The affirmative reply is supported by the fact that we want to have a good life, and are aware of being moved by that desire. The negative reply is suggested by the previous considerations which show that an act could contribute to our well-being only when there are other adequate reasons for taking it. Hence, possibly well-being does not have a normative force independent of the force of the reason on which it rides piggy-back.

These yes and no answers are compatible. The rules for the correct application of 'reason for action' are flexible, and allow for great redundancy. They do not require that if the fact that P is a reason for performing an action then the case for it is stronger than the case constituted by the other reasons alone, and they allow that one reason (e.g. promoting one's well-being) can be present only if others to which it is logically related are as well. However, this reconciling position is likely to be resisted, and resisted on the basis of two (inter-related) considerations. First, without assuming that promoting one's well-being is a reason (with independent weight) for the person whose life it is we cannot, it may be argued, explain the way in which people are rationally and inevitably partial to themselves. Second, without that assumption one cannot explain the character of conflict-situations in which reason requires people to sacrifice their well-being for a moral cause. I believe that both arguments fail.

The second argument presupposes that when people sacrifice their interests or their well-being for a moral or some other cause they find that other cause a more compelling reason than their own well-being. The facts do not bear out this assumption. Often what is regarded as a sacrifice or a self-denying action has to do with giving up means that one may use for one's own purposes. For example, giving a large part of one's income to charity or handing one's home over to refugees and moving in with one's parents. Reducing the means at one's disposal need not affect one's well-being at all.<sup>21</sup> Those who deny that must think that the richer one is the better life one has—a doubtful proposition. More interesting are cases in which one abandons, interrupts, or jeopardizes a relationship, or a pursuit, for example a career, for a cause. Here too there may be

self-sacrifice without compromising one's well-being. One abandons a career in the financial sector for the life of a primary school teacher when one becomes aware of the great shortage of teachers, and the growing rate of illiteracy, truancy and criminality among the young in that part of the country. Why should that reduce one's well-being? Some abandon life in the financial services, which they find "relentlessly competitive, forcing one into conspicuous consumption empty of any nourishment to the soul, doing nothing but make the rich richer", for the "slower, more relaxed, more socially valuable", life of a teacher, and they do so just because of these reasons. There is no sacrifice involved, and certainly their life is improved, not sacrificed or reduced.

Well-being is put in jeopardy when people do not succeed in replacing what they abandoned with a new rewarding content, when having abandoned career and friends to volunteer as an aid-worker in a foreign country, they then, when the crisis is over and they are back home, fail to find a satisfying job, fail to pick up with old friends or make new ones, and so on. The sacrifice is independent of that failure, of the diminution in the quality of their life. The self-sacrifice consists in the initial abandonment of (part of) what their life was about at the time, of some important elements of it, out of conviction that that is what they should do, whether they want to or not (i.e. for categorical, will- and goal-independent reasons). The loss of well-being is subsequent, it consists in the failure to find equally rewarding and fulfilling substitutes, a failure which many experience when they change their situation, by choice or necessity, which has nothing to do with any sacrifice, but is due to bad luck, bad choices, economic downturn, or other factors.

Is not the view I am putting forward here naïve? Does it not disregard the degree to which we are inclined to favor ourselves, the degree to which we have a special concern with ourselves? This takes us to the first objection I mentioned above, namely that to explain the inevitable partiality to ourselves we need to acknowledge that our well-being has normative force for us. If we all do, inescapably, conduct ourselves as if our well-being has an independent normative force for us, can it be that we are all wrong, and that it does not have such force? I do not deny the force of this thought, of this conditional. What I deny is its antecedent.

There are several aspects to our partiality to ourselves. I will comment on four. First, most humans, like most animals of other species, have a range of strongly preferred, sometimes even instinctive, responses to what are often dangerous situations, responses which tend to keep us out of danger, and they have a preference, again strongly built into animals capable of that determination, for extending their life, in almost any circumstances. This instinct for survival, or desire for ever greater longevity, has nothing to do with well-being. It is not the desire, which many of us also have, to have a good life. In general, the quality of people's life is independent of its duration. The observation 'what a shame he died so young, but at least he had a good life' is as familiar as its converse: 'he had a very long life, but what a miserable one', and is often true. True, sometimes dying

interrupts before fruition pursuits central to people's life, and that may indeed affect the quality of the life they had. But such interruptions are only contingently related to death, and affect only certain kinds of pursuits, those which terminate or culminate in some specific accomplishment. Many: friendships, jobs like being a teacher, an interest in the opera and so on, do not normally have such ends (though one may have some subsidiary ends within them, like striving to see one's friend through a difficult patch). In general, longevity is one thing, well-being another.

The second manifestation of special concern with oneself has to do with the fact that our actions and experiences are, trivially, our own. Hence while I may find no more reason why I should have a certain enjoyable or otherwise valuable experience than anyone else, my relation to it will be different. The same is true of my actions. The reason for me to do something appealing may be the same as the reason for you to do it. But my doing is special to me simply because it is mine. The significance of this triviality is that concern with the successful completion of an action I am engaged in or of an experience I am having is part of what it is for the experience and action to be mine. I may lose heart, change my mind and abandon an action midway. But so long as I am acting I want the action to succeed—not a desire additional to my action, but one which is what makes *this* (i.e. given the character it has) action mine. The same is true of my welcome experiences: part of having them is caring about their proper completion (which may be wanting them to last long, or to follow their proper path, depending what kind of experiences are in question).<sup>22</sup>

It is a mistake to think that this form of partiality to self, the difference between my caring about my actions and experiences, and caring about those of others, essentially involves caring about one's own actions and experiences more, or that it essentially involves thinking that, or behaving as if one thought that, one has more reason that one's own action or experience succeed than that those of others should. I will turn to such undoubtedly familiar preferences next. Here I simply point out that they are not to be identified with the necessary asymmetry between our concern for our own actions and experiences and our concern for those of others. This asymmetry, part and parcel of what it is to be an agent and to have experiences, does not stand in the way of knowing that one's actions and experiences are no more valuable than those of others, and that, where this is the case, one has as much reason to see to it that others act successfully and have rewarding experiences as that one have them oneself. I may be in the middle of possessing the remaining free seat when I perceive someone else trying to possess it, and if I recognize that he has a better claim on it than I do (being older, for example) I will abort my action. Lovers know the need to make their partner's experience as pleasurable as they can, even if this involves moderating their own pleasure, and so on and so forth.

These comments relate to present activities and experiences. In less obvious ways, which I will not be able to elucidate here, the same is true of past and

future acts and experiences. Being a person (the same person) essentially involves different attitudes to one's own past actions and experiences, or to those one intends, or plans, or foresees having, than to others. This is part and parcel of what it is to be the same person. Yet again, these asymmetries do not essentially involve belief in, or conduct as if one believed in, either the greater value of one's own actions and experiences, or a greater reason to care about them, or to succeed in them.

The third form of self-other partiality is more difficult for me to characterize. I do not understand it, and that is probably partly due to the fact that I am not sure what instances such partiality. Perhaps it can be described as a tendency to act as if one has more reason to care about one's own experiences, actions and goals than about those of others, when this is not the case. It is this last 'when this is not the case' which makes the class of cases hard to identify. Some people believe that whenever I have something which someone else wants more intensely than I do then it is better that he have it than that I do. Others believe that if I have something the loss of which will affect me less than the benefit it will bring to another then I should give it to the other, and so on. This is the ground of much moral reflection. The difficulty is that without having fairly definite views on what people ought to do it is very difficult to understand what sort of systematic preferences cause them to fail to act as they should.

The difficulty is not due to a doubt regarding the existence of such preferences. It is probably true that concerning any remotely sensible view of our obligations to others it is fairly easy to find types of situations, within our experience, where it would be generally agreed that people often disregard those obligations and behave in ways which would be justified only if they had more reason to care about their own concerns than they do. I suspect that people will agree that they themselves are prone to the same biases. The difficulty is not that the existence of the preferences is in doubt, but that without knowing their scope it is difficult to know their origin and nature. They may be due to being socialized in societies with prevalent practices which militate against conformity to some moral obligations, while acknowledging their validity. Or they may be due to social factors which encourage the emergence of certain psychological tendencies which make, in some cases, for psychological conflicts when conformity with acknowledged moral obligations is called for. In other words, these biases may be due to contingent social formations, rather than inherent in our nature as some would have it.

It is a moot point. What seems less problematic is that these preferences cannot be explained as favoring one's own *well-being*. The preference manifests itself in petty meanness, as when we become attached to objects with little value to our life, and are reluctant to part with them when we ought to for the sake of others. In general it seems to me to be a bias arising out of obsessive attachments to objects, or to options or prospects, surrender of which sometimes may affect our well-being, but often will clearly not, and sometimes the very attachment prevents us from advancing our interests. There is no evidence here of a general

tendency to believe, or behave as if one did, that well-being is of independent normative force.

Some cases of partiality to self may be different, possibly constituting a fourth category. Suppose that in today's world it is more valuable for a person to have primary than university education, and that I have a choice between spending money on my own or my child's university education or using it to enable a stranger to have primary education. Arguably, everyone would be strongly inclined to use the money for his own or his child's education, rather than for the stranger. Arguably, this manifests partiality to oneself, and that is so even if morally or rationally one should spend the money on one's own or one's child's university education. In cases like this the sources of partiality are not obsessive attachment to one's possessions or to one's established routines. But nor are they to be explained by concern for one's well-being. Rather, they express concern for one's ability to develop and pursue goals successfully. They may advance one's well-being, but they may sacrifice it for moral or other causes. Generally speaking<sup>23</sup>, one's own well-being is not an independent normative consideration for the person whose life is in question. This is consistent with people caring about their well-being, for what they then care about is what their well-being consists in, that is their success in their adopted valuable (as they see matters) relationships and pursuits, and in those they may adopt or pursue in the future. People may care about various aspects of their life. They may care about their service to their communities, to their families, about their success in leading a moral and upright life, and much else, and among other things they may care about their well-being. (Even when they do it may not be seen by them as the most important aspect of their life. It can be a consolation for failing to achieve what they did care about most: I wish I were a really good scientist, one may say, but at least I had a good life).

Whether or not people care about their well-being depends partly on whether their culture made the concept available to them, and partly on whether they came to focus their concerns in that way. Many people do not. They may care about their virtue or about some accomplishments they have set their heart on, rather than about their well-being. But even they must acknowledge that having a good life is a good, even if it is not one they particularly care about.

That having been said, well-being enjoys a special position among the different perspectives from which to judge a life. The factors which determine people's well-being do not include everything in their life, and need not coincide with the factors those people care most about. But they do include everything of importance.<sup>24</sup> This makes well-being the most comprehensive perspective from which to judge a life. It is, therefore, a natural default perspective—when there is no special reason to think of a life from another perspective (because of its moral importance, or special achievement in some area, or because the person concerned cares so much about that aspect of his life) the way by which we, who have the concept, will judge it is by how good it was for that person.

### 5. *Respecting strangers*

The conclusions of the previous section constitute a rejection of part of the radical suggestion. It says that **when we care about people, and when we ought to care about people, what we do, or ought to, care about is their well-being**. I argued that this is not necessarily the way in which people care about themselves.<sup>25</sup> But if so, if people's concern about themselves is not necessarily concern about their well-being, why should our concern for others express itself as concern about their well-being? Similarly, if we do not have an independent reason to promote our own well-being why should we have any reason to care about the well-being of others?

The symmetry which the radical suggestion offered between caring for oneself and caring for others was a source of strength. It fulfilled two functions. First, it showed the point of caring for another's well-being. If this is what people care about when they care about themselves then this must be what matters when we care, or should care, about them. To deny that is to assume that people are always wrong in their concern for themselves. Second, it provided an argument why we should care about the well-being of strangers. Since my well-being is not more valuable than that of anybody else if I care about my own well-being, holding it to be of value, I should also care about the well-being of others.

Once we reject the radical suggestion in as much as it applies to people's attitudes to themselves the two questions: 'Is there any point in caring about the well-being of another?' 'Do we have a duty to do so?' become moot. If there is no point in caring for the well-being of another then when we care about people because we like them, are attracted to them, but owe them no special duty, it is pointless for our concern for them to express itself by caring about their well-being. Likewise, if I do not take my own well-being as an independent reason, realisation that my value, or the value of my well-being is no greater than that of anyone else cannot yield an argument that I have a duty towards others' well-being, since I have none towards my own.

The first question 'is there any point in caring about the well-being of another?' is easy. An affirmative answer does not imply that there is no point in caring about other aspects of people's life (similarly an affirmative answer to the second question does not imply that we do not have other duties towards strangers). Clearly, having a good life is a good thing, and that is all it takes to show that there is a point to caring about the well-being of another. We can express concern for others in a variety of ways; concern for their well-being is one such way.

But do we have a general duty to be concerned about the well-being of people in general, given that we have no "special"<sup>26</sup> reason to be concerned about our own well-being? The issue is complex. All I can do here is sketch the outline of a view which gives well-being a central, albeit indirect, role in our general moral duties towards strangers. The outline will leave both the content of the duty, and the arguments for its existence more hinted at than spelt out.

Ethical doctrines which take a duty to promote the well-being of people (and of other animals) to be a core moral duty often seek to derive it directly from the value of the life of people (and of other animals). The value of those lives is a reason for the promotion of the well-being of those whose life it is. There is however a gap between the value of life and a duty to promote the well-being of others, a gap which some sought to fill with the inference from the supposed necessary truth that people seek their own well-being through the fact that no one's life or well-being is more valuable than that of any other, to a duty to promote the well-being of all. Having abandoned that argument what can replace it?

That question is misleading, for the conclusion I will advance is not that of the discarded argument. I do not think that we have a duty to promote the well-being of others. Rather, we have a duty to protect their ability to forge a good life for themselves. But before we examine the conclusion we should turn to the argument. It derives from a general view of rational agency, that is the intentional actions of creatures capable of acting in light of a view of how things are in the world. Rational agents, even when acting intentionally, do not always deliberate prior to acting. But their capacity for rational agency plays a part in all their intentional actions in a variety of ways. Some of their intentional actions are parts of sequences of actions each one of which is more or less automatic, where the sequence as a whole is adopted for reasons. Besides, most of the time when rational agents act intentionally their capacity to deliberate is a controlling background presence, so that even if it plays no, or only a limited role in initiating the actions, they will be interrupted or modified if feedback indicates that they do not 'go well', and that background presence justifies describing all intentional actions as actions for a reason. The reasons are perceived features of the world which tell in favour of the action. Such features, when really present, are value properties. Value properties are normative properties, that is they favor or disfavor actions. Value properties play an essential role in explaining intentional action, for they render action in pursuit of value intelligible, and they play an essential role in the ability of rational agents to form intentions and to act intentionally. That something has a value property favors (or disfavors) actions which relate to it in appropriate ways. As discussed in Section Two, values provide two kinds of reasons. The value of anything is a reason to engage with it, and it is a reason to respect it.

Regarding people we also have both reasons for engaging and reasons for respecting them. We engage with them when we strike up a friendship, or when we have some other special relationship with them. We engage with them as creatures with their own tastes, their own ways of understanding the world and of reacting to it. That capacity colors many aspects of our relationships with others. It makes our engagement with people reciprocal in a way in which our engagement with a painting, a novel, a mountain, or animals with much more limited ability to understand themselves and the world, is not. We may express affection towards them, when it is welcome, try to lead them towards having a

correct understanding of what is important in life, join them on common adventures, holidays, or other joint activities, and much more. Many such manifestations of a caring attitude presuppose reciprocity between persons who can share activities, conversations, and experiences.

We have no duty to engage with others. But we have a duty to respect them. People may be of value in a variety of ways, all calling for appropriate forms of respect. But central to our duties towards them is the duty to respect them as rational agents, who can engage with value, and with whom we or others can engage in reciprocal ways. One question which has to be postponed concerns the stringency of the reasons we have to respect people. But we have to say something, however sketchy, about the content of that duty of respect, as I shall refer to it. As mentioned, respect calls on us to protect what is of value. It therefore imposes different requirements when we respect a person for his beauty, or for being a caring parent, etc. The duty of respect we have towards people *qua* rational agents is to protect their capacities as rational agents, and the conditions for their successful exercise.

That latter point is, of course, crucial. Am I not overreaching here: let it be conceded that the capacity for rational action is valuable and therefore we have a duty to respect it. Duties of respect, however, consist in protecting what is respected from harm and decay. Should not that mean protecting people's powers of rational agency, but not providing them with any special conditions for their exercise? This suggestion misunderstands the value of capacities. Capacities are valuable only if their exercise is, under some conditions, valuable. A capacity which can never be put to use has no value. Hence just as valuing a capacity entails valuing its exercise and the opportunity to exercise it under certain conditions so respecting it involves a duty to protect the appropriate conditions for its use.

Here we have to acknowledge another implication of the duty of respect. In general respecting something of value, say a painting, involves not only refraining from damaging it, but also taking steps to protect it from decay, e.g. by constructing a display case with regulated temperature and humidity. The point of respect is to make engagement with value possible, and the protection of the painting has to assure not merely its continued existence, but the possibility of appreciating it. Respecting persons requires more than refraining from unduly limiting their opportunities to exercise their powers of rational agency. It requires making sure that such opportunities are available. This too follows from the fact that the value of a capacity is in its proper exercise. Protecting it involves insuring the availability of adequate opportunities for such exercise.

Those conditions, I am suggesting, are the conditions which enable people to have a good life. The suggestion is consistent with my earlier conclusions, and does not take well-being to be the end of our powers of rational agency. A person who sacrifices his well-being for a moral cause, for example, may be a perfect exemplar of the successful exercise of our powers of rational agency.

I do suggest however that those powers are valuable because they enable us to determine, through both small decisions and large, the course of our life, in conditions which make a meaningful and rewarding life possible. Contrast them with a person trapped in a confined space, two metres by two, with water and food readily available, but with nothing else he can do. Assume that he has no language, no skills other than drinking and eating, etc. That person has no use for his capacity for rational agency. Had he been a slug he would have done just as well. The capacity for rational agency is of value only if it can be used in conditions which enable people to make something of their life. The measure of that is a controversial matter. I tend to be a minimalist. I believe, for example, that in the Stone Age it was possible for people to have rich and rewarding lives, in which their capacity for rational agency enabled them to express the emotional, imaginative, creative, physical and other aspects of their nature. But we need not take a position on this issue. It becomes a debate about the conditions under which people have a fair chance to enjoy a good life, if they sensibly try. My point is only that the conditions under which people have such a fair chance are the conditions which make for a successful exercise of their capacity for rational agency, and therefore that protecting those conditions is part of the duty to respect people because of their capacity for rational agency, and that that does not require belief that the proper use of their rational agency is to pursue their own well-being, or that their capacity for rational agency will fail or remain unfulfilled if they do not enjoy a considerable level of well-being.

My suggestion is not that there is no other way to delineate the conditions which respect for the capacity for rational agency calls on us to protect. That is highly unlikely. My suggestion is that for us, for many of us, today, it is natural to identify those conditions in part by the fact that they are the same conditions needed for people to have a fair chance to enjoy a good life, if they make a decent go of it. Two factors make this way of identifying some of what the duty of respect requires instructive:

First, the good life is for each of us to live. It is not in anyone's gift. It consists, I have argued, in the wholehearted and successful pursuit of worthwhile relationships and goals. They are goals we have to adopt and pursue. This requires the use of our powers of rational agency. We may, as we saw, take decisions, even wise and necessary decisions, which sacrifice our well-being, and we may do so with open eyes, but we can do so only when those options are open to us. The conditions for having a good life are conditions in which we can use our powers of agency to forge a life for ourselves. The reference to the conditions of well-being highlights the importance of agency.

Second, the connection to the conditions of well-being relates the duty of respect for people to welfarist thinking and policies. But it would be a mistake to read this as suggesting that we can derive specific personal or social policies from a statement of the fundamental duty of respect, any more than we can determine what personal actions or social policies are mandated by concern for the conditions for well-being, taken in the abstract. The second advantage of

pointing out the relations of a duty of respecting persons to welfarist considerations is that it brings out ways in which what the duty of respect requires is socially relative.

This is due to at least three factors. First, the ability to forge a life for oneself depends on one's ability to take advantage of the opportunities available in the society in which one lives. Arguably, in medieval Europe illiteracy may not have jeopardized most people's ability to enjoy a good life, whereas today it does. To be able to act as rational agents we need access to an adequate range of those opportunities which are available here and now. Second, respecting people's rational agency involves protecting their self-respect as rational agents.<sup>27</sup> People's ability to enjoy self-respect depends on social recognition, and social status, and that too expresses itself in different ways in different societies. The duty to protect for people conditions which give them a fair chance to lead a good life, should they sensibly try to do so, helps in shaping personal decisions or social policies only when its application to the social conditions in which one operates is carefully considered.

Third, the connection between respect for people and the conditions for well-being brings out the complex interplay of factors which characterize friendships and other personal relations. The duty of respect is categorical and applies to friends and strangers alike. In itself it implies distance. It is a duty to protect conditions for the successful exercise of rational agency, conditions which make for the real possibility of a good life, leaving the respected people free to lead their own life as they see fit. Friendships break down this barrier of distance. Typically, our friends get involved with what we care about. To a lesser or greater degree we can expect them to help with what we are trying to achieve, because that is what we are trying to achieve, regardless of whether pursuing our goals or relationships will be good for us. Friends are caught in a dilemma which strangers are spared, the dilemma of whether to engage with us as we want them to do, or whether to protect us from ourselves. Different friendships often define themselves by the way they negotiate this tension. Different people determine themselves by their capacity to accept different degrees of involvement of others in their lives.

Several writers expressed concern that a moral outlook which requires us to promote the well-being of others is "too demanding", and is at odds with what can be expected of people given our social or biological nature. That concern does not apply to the view I am advocating here. We cannot make others have a good life. They have to lead their own life. We can and do affect the way our friends' lives go because our friendships make us part of their life, the success of our friendships is part of the success of our life as well as of the life of our friends. Friendships involve engagement with, partnership in, various aspects of the life of our friends. But regarding strangers our duty to respect them as persons requires a certain distance. It requires protecting the conditions which enable them to have a good life, and that may be demanding. It imposes constraints on how we may lead our lives. But it also sets limits to what we

owe strangers. In being a duty of respect for their capacity for rational agency it requires us to leave them alone to lead their life. It protects them from excessive interference with their life, and it protects us from getting too closely involved with the lives of strangers. It protects our ability to lead a life of our own.

## 6. Conclusion

The preceding discussion took no account of instrumental considerations, or of considerations arising out of special national or societal bonds, and of much else. It aimed at the most abstract case for duties or reasons to care about people. I rejected the radical suggestion. Agreeing that well-being is a good thing to have, I failed to find a reason with an independent force to care about people's well-being. Given that well-being consists in successful pursuit of *valuable* goals and relationships there is an obvious reason to pursue whatever it consists in, i.e. those valuable goals and relationships. But I could not think of a general reason for pursuing well-being, one's own or that of others, beyond that.

I do not believe that there is one way in which caring about people does or should manifest itself. In particular, it seems natural that different people will care about different aspects of their life, and so long as they do not value the valueless or denigrate what is valuable there is nothing amiss if they value their life for their contribution to their country, or for their relations with their family, or for the fun they had, or for having had a good life, etc. Several of these dimensions of one's life may coincide, but they need not.

Caring about people consists in respecting them and engaging with them in various ways. What people care about in their own life is an important guide for their friends, for those who care for them by engaging with them. When it comes to strangers the dominant duty is one of respect for others, and that includes the duty to secure for people opportunities which give them a fair chance for having a good life if they make a decent attempt at it.

## Notes

1. For helpful conversations and comments I am indebted to Don Regan, Stephen Everson, Ulrike Heuer, Tom Pink, Marie McGinn, Christian List, and Carl Wellman who often raised questions I could not answer within the confines of this article.
2. See *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: OUP 1986) Ch. 12; *Ethics in the Public Domain* (Oxford: OUP, paperback edition 1995) Ch. 1; *Engaging Reason* (Oxford: OUP 1999) Ch. 13. Scanlon's position in *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP 1998) Ch. 3 is in many ways similar to mine. This article ties up this conception of well-being with the account of value I offered in some other writings, especially in *Value, Respect, and Attachment* (Cambridge: CUP 1999) Ch. 4.
3. It rose to prominence in part because its philosophical use is more remote from its "ordinary" meaning than that of its likely alternatives such as 'happiness' or 'welfare', and therefore less likely to mislead.

4. I will assume that one can take pleasure in what one believes to be bad, unworthy or worthless, but that such pleasure is exceptional, not statistically, but in being parasitic on the normal case, that is where it is believed to be worthwhile. The poignancy of the exceptional derives from the flouting of the normal, in a spirit of defiance, rejection of common opinion, self-hatred, self-loathing, self-punishment, etc.
5. See *Engaging Reason* (Oxford: OUP 1999) Chapter One.
6. This is the way in which D. Regan understands the implications of Moore's conception of the good. For a powerful presentation of the case for it, with which he challenges those who argue for the promotion of well-being, see his 'Why am I My Brother's Keeper?' *Reason and Value*, eds. R.J. Wallace, P. Pettit, S. Scheffler, M. Smith (Oxford: OUP 2004) 202.
7. Well-being can be enhanced by the pursuit of both instrumentally and intrinsically valuable goals. But for the most part my discussion will disregard instrumentally valuable pursuits. Some of the conclusions are restricted to intrinsically valuable relationships and pursuits.
8. At least not in themselves. They may be causally relevant.
9. It is tempting to say that the difference is between episodes in the life of people and episodes in which they figure, but which are not part of their life. Only the latter can be good for a person. This may be true but is not in itself very illuminating, as the division we draw, for this purpose, between what is part of the life and what is not is tailor-made to respond to certain normative concerns. It cannot be used to explain them.
10. Oddly, the same is not true of what is bad for us. Events in which we are totally passive can be directly bad for us. They can violate our integrity, dignity, etc.
11. That is excluding being good conditionally or instrumentally.
12. At least pro tanto. Sometimes we say 'she is your friend' just to indicate that she is well-disposed towards you, a fact of which you may be unaware. This is not friendship as a relationship, of which alone I write above. There are false friends, etc., but I disregard these nuances.
13. Obviously, something can have both personal and impersonal value.
14. Of course, even regarding them, events in which one is passive, like being jilted by one's lover, may affect one's well-being, but these passive elements derive their significance from being embedded in one's active pursuits and relationships.
15. To save space I will omit mention of the non-pattern-dependent factors of well-being, as, being common to all conceptions of well-being, they are not relevant to this argument.
16. An extreme example of the dependence on their role in life of the impact of experiences & actions on well-being is the contrast between a person committed to a life of variety and change and a drifter. They may spend a period of very similar actions and experiences, but in the drifter they are meaningless, whereas in the life of the one pursuing variety and change they mark his success in having the life he set out to have, thus, other things being equal, contributing to his well-being.
17. I have benefited from an illuminating discussion of the relations between well-being and the meaning of life by Malte Gerhold, (unpublished D.Phil. dissertation, Oxford 2004).

18. Needless to say, nihilists differ from others in thinking that there is nothing which could give their life, or that of others, point or meaning.
19. I am not claiming that my list of these cases is exhaustive. One example of a type of case which is not covered by it is that of moral dilemmas in which a person has to choose between two evils. There may be a clear right choice—one option may clearly be the lesser evil. But arguably, choosing the lesser evil, even when unavoidable and justified, cannot enhance the agent's well-being
20. And obviously I do not mean ordinary risk-taking in actions which would if successful enhance our well-being, and can be known to be so.
21. Notice that in a society used to charitable giving only disproportionately large giving is considered as a sacrifice. Similarly, where people are commonly moving in with their parents to make their homes available for others' use this is not considered a sacrifice. Such factors militate against understanding sacrifice in relation to well-being, and support my suggestion below.
22. Likewise when they are unwelcome we want them to end.
23. I have suggested that one can make the advancement of one's well-being one of one's goals, and in that case it has such additional normative force as one's goals have. See *Engaging Reason* pp. 328–330
24. To clarify consider, by way of illustration, an ocean-going sailor. He judges himself only by his record-breaking attempts. But he has friends and family, and other interests, and they too contribute to his well-being, (even if less than his sailing), as do the non-pattern-dependent factors. Sailing matters to him most. But well-being is the most comprehensive perspective on his life, taking account of everything of importance, and leaving out only episodes which are insignificant for any of the determinants of well-being.
25. Thus it is also a critique of views like Darwall's that the welfare of a person is what 'it would be rational to want for him for his sake' *Welfare and Rational Care* (Princeton: Princeton UP 2002) 9.
26. I am using this hedging expression to allow for the fact that because having a good life is a good thing some people may be 'unhealthily' concerned with it as explained in *Engaging Reason op. cit.*
27. Here again there is a complex argument to unfold, with qualifications and elaborations.